Omnibus V

The Medieval World

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Dramatic Arts

What are the Dramatic Arts?

To learn about the dramatic arts is to learn about the incarnation of words. An historical survey of theater provides the student with a narrative of its cultural use and impact that mirrors the very nature of drama itself. The word *drama* has its origin as a Greek word that means "action." The dramatic arts then involve the performance or acting out of literature (prose or verse) by actors for an audience.

Ancient Religious Ritual

Theatrical professor Paul Kuritz has written, "The history of the dramatic theater tells nothing less than the tale of people's changing conceptions of themselves and of the universe." Theater incarnates worldview, and the performing arts have had a central role in human culture, reflected even in the earliest known written languages.

Long before our secularized age, religion was the controlling paradigm of interpreting reality. As such, the temple was the center point of societies, and the worship of deity or deities procured atonement for sins, agricultural bounty, and military victory over enemies. The ancient religious rituals were dramatic, allowing worshippers to participate in the supernatural by re-enacting the actions and primeval stories of the deity. The liturgical cult required ritual performance of music, dance, and drama.

Classical Theater

The Western tradition of theater as we know it begins with the ancient city-state of Athens around the fifth century B.C. The word we use for actor, *thespian*, is derived from the name Thespis, the reputed creator of Athenian drama. The essence of theater is captured in the term, *mimesis*, the imitation or representation of nature or self. Each spring at the Dionysian festival, a competition of plays and their performances dedicated to the god Dionysus took place in a newly developed theatrical stage structure that is now common to our experience: a stage area with scenic backdrops surrounded by a semi-circle of audience seating ascending a hill. Actors would wear masks to display their characters and engage in exaggerated bodily gestures to communicate emotion to the thousands of audience members. The plays continued to draw on the myths and legends of the Greek religion, though soon the human part of the story took center stage.

The most celebrated playwrights of the Greek era were Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, but the most-remembered writing about theater is the academic analysis of drama from Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle defined tragedy as the highest poetic form, involving an imitation of reality through an inevitable sequence of events (containing a beginning, middle, and

end) with the intent of arousing "pity and fear" in the audience, resulting in *catharsis*, relief through the purging of emotions.

The thousand years of Roman civilization (509 B.C.–A.D. 476) continued the culture of Greek theater, with the subjects becoming more secular and the favored genre shifting to comedy. But by the third century, drama was overshadowed in popularity by a different form of public performance and entertainment: Circus. Athletic games, chariot races, and gladiatorial contests were held in massive arenas. Like the action movies and sports events of today, spectacle reigned. Gladiator events, though engaging in real murder of its participants, were often staged theatrically as famous historic land and sea battles. By A.D. 568 these spectacles ended, following the rise of Christianity that would soon replace the mythology and theater of the classical Roman Empire with a new paradigm rooted in a "Holy Roman Empire."

Medieval Theater

The Medieval age of Western Civilization, spanning the next thousand years from A.D 476 to 1517 was dominated by the institution of the Roman Catholic Church. Christian festivals replaced pagan ones. Theater was turned into a teaching tool of the Church. By 1264 this liturgical church drama developed into three kinds of plays performed by the laity during the many holy day feasts throughout the year: Mystery, miracle, and morality plays. Mystery plays would depict all of history from creation, through the Exodus, the miracles of Christ, His Passion and Resurrection, and on to the Final Judgment. They would be massive productions and involve hundreds of community participants for days on end, bringing God and sacred history into the common experience of the populace. Despite the introduction of the printing press in 1454, most peasants were illiterate, and the use of these dramas substituted for their lack of access to the written texts of the Bible. Miracle plays dramatized the lives of the saints. Morality plays were allegories, using symbolism to explore the Christian life. Plays like "Mankind" and "Everyman" taught the audience moral lessons, disciplining their tastes and training their judgments.[1] In these plays, the Devil was not only the tempter of mankind, but he often supplied the comic element of the play as his plans unraveled.

Mystery plays depicted all of history, from Creation to the Last Judgment, and were typically performed on wagons that were then rolled to various stations around the village. Some towns, like Chester, England, have in modern times revived the practice, and the re-enactments are large and popular community events.

Renaissance Theater

With the rise of humanism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, came a revival of classical Greco-Roman civilization in the arts of the Renaissance. Though God was not absent in Renaissance cosmology, man was nevertheless the measure of all things, with science and reason being his foundation for beauty and truth. This led to Renaissance artists approaching drama as ordered, calm, rational, and enforcing social stability through a more realistic imitation of nature.

A great divide increased between the uneducated masses and the educated aristocracy in Western art and theater. Art would divide into the popular and crude "low arts" of the masses and the refined "high arts" of the courts and wealthy patrons. Educated circles preferred imitations of Greek and Roman drama, with its unities of time (the story could depict no more than one day), place (the story could have only one location), and action (the story could have only one plot) and its strict rules of decorum (no violence could be depicted on-stage). Popular drama, in contrast, drew on the artistic freedoms of the medieval drama. The biblical plays depicted the whole history of

the universe, from creation to the last judgment, in one afternoon; they took place in many locations; they had many plots; and in depicting incidents in the Bible such as the crucifixion, they showed violence.

In this milieu William Shakespeare (1564–1616) wrote his comedies, tragedies, and histories, including critique of both culture and king, with the dramatic liberty inspired by the biblical plays. His work evidences an implicit Christian worldview at times united with humanist undertones, within a dramatic context of royal turmoil (*Macbeth*, *King Lear*), corruption and decadence (*Hamlet*), and the comic irony of social mores (*Taming of the Shrew*). English Renaissance theater (1558–1642) became the television or cinema of the day, with regularly scheduled new episodes and multiple reruns for the public, mixing sensational entertainment with moral teaching for the amusement of the masses at public playhouses.

Social Theater

The Age of Enlightenment (eighteenth century) marked a new period in history championed by science and reason and culminating in the decline of monarchies and the rise of the middle class and democratic government. It was an age of revolutions resulting from the logical extension of a belief in natural religion, natural humanity, and natural rights. The problems with the world were seen in the social order not in the individual.

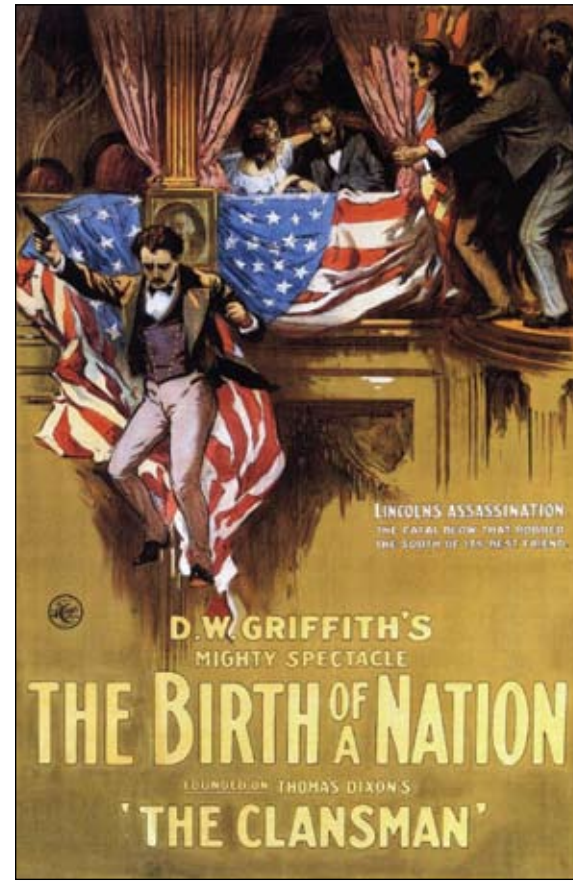
And yet the style of drama in the Enlightenment was not something new and experimental. Reacting against the apparent messiness of drama in the biblical, medieval tradition, the playwrights of the eighteenth century went back to the rational rules and conventions of the Greeks and Romans as the neo-classical style came into vogue.

Courtly drama died in the eighteenth century and was overrun by the middle class—the "everyman"—interested in addressing social injustice, of which, not surprisingly the ruling aristocracy and clergy were the predominant offenders. French playwright Denis Diderot (1713–1784) embodied this "turn of the ages" with emotion's ultimate triumph over academic rationality. He advanced rationalism with his editing of the first encyclopedia, yet eventually came to value imagination and passion as more important in his art. He sought to "inspire men with love of virtue and horror of vice" through his middle class subjects exploring domestic problems in everyday life.

Romantic Theater

The rise of the Industrial Revolution (nineteenth century) was the technological extension of Enlightenment science. The Romantics of this era felt that humanity was dehumanized through industrialism and mass production and that nature was being raped by technology. In response, they exalted individual emotion, subjectivity and passionate expression, and a return to the "wild" of nature. This also brought a fascination with Oriental philosophy and religion and the dark side of existence, as embodied in the chaos of nature against the social order and taboos. The rise of the artist as individual genius and hero "ahead of his time," coupled with the elevation of art as a transcendent experience of reality, created for the Romantics a form of art as religion and artist as high priest.

Opera emerged as a dominant form of romanticism, and German composer Richard Wagner's (1813–1883)



Even though the Civil War epic *The Birth of a Nation* was still in the days of silent film, it successfully integrated full-length feature storytelling with new techniques of the camera to create an intimacy of viewing experience that transported the audience into the world of the story in a way that the stage could never achieve.

operas of mythical tragedy and spectacle (*The Ring of the Nibelung*) became a quasi-religious embodiment of the romantic spirit in theater. The most famous French poet, Victor Hugo (1802–1885), brought a deeply lived passion to the stage with his play *Hernani*, critical of the monarchy and provoking enthusiastic audience reaction, a blockbuster of its day.

Realist Theater

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries developed through a paradigm of Newtonian scientific method, Darwinian evolutionary theory, and Einstein's newly constructed Relativity. This "positivist" elevation of empirical observation as the only form of true knowledge resulted in a scientific approach to society as well. Romanticism died hard under the microscope of detailed observation. Theatrical realists developed an approach that focused on the present rather than a romantic past, dispassionate accuracy in acting rather than emotional excess, an attack on traditional Christian morality as harmful to social evolution, and the rising middle class as "bourgeois." Thus, "social injustice" decried in the theater was often rooted in an ideological resentment of religion, power, and wealth. Realistic drama would be epitomized by such playwrights as Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) in Scandinavia, Anton Chekov (1860–1904) in Russia, George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) in England, and Tennessee Williams (1911–1983) in America.

Silent Cinema

One technological invention would further the illusion of reality in the performance arts and ultimately transform theater: the photograph. In 1839, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre invented photography, which was supposedly the ultimate in scientific empirical reproduction of reality. Photography not only captured all observable details, but it allegedly diminished the elements of poetry, symbolism, and imagination. By 1895 the Lumiére brothers had created the first motion picture camera, but it did not become popular until 1903, when *The Great Train Robbery* added storytelling to the new technology and movies took off. While dramatic theater as we have been discussing certainly continued on into the present with a rich history of style and influence, we will now shift over to the cinema, because cinematic theater would ultimately eclipse staged theater as the dominant medium of dramatic storytelling for the mainstream masses of the twentieth century. The stage would ultimately be transformed into the screen.

Lillian Gish was a star of stage and screen, beginning her film career in silent cinema, including a role in Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. She successfully made the transition to talkies and even to television when that new medium began to become popular in the late 1940s and 50s.

From its origins and until 1920, the cinema was silent, sometimes being accompanied in theaters by a live orchestra. D.W. Griffith's Civil War epic, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), successfully integrated full-length feature storytelling with new techniques of the camera to create an intimacy of viewing experience that would transport the audience into

the world of the story in a way that the stage could never achieve. Acting gestures that once had to be expressive enough for audiences to see at a distance (*pantomime*), would now become increasingly more subtle and realistic with the close-up. The camera's ability to move within the environment of the scene produced a more experiential observation that theater could only imagine.

The Battleship Potemkin (1925) by Sergei Eisenstein was also influential with its use of montage editing to portray Russian history in favor of Communist propaganda. The montage theory, which would affect the power of cinema to this very day, argued that the camera does not merely capture objective reality; it defines reality by directing the audience to see what it wants them to see. For example, three images: A man cringing, another man pointing a gun, and a man standing firm, would create the *image* of courage. But the exact same images in reverse order would create the *image* of cowardice. Thus, by aligning certain images in a certain order and from a certain viewpoint, the storyteller directs the thoughts of the viewer in a deliberate direction. All cinema becomes the subjective perception of the filmmaker directing the audience to see the story (i.e., reality) through his worldview lens.

Sound Cinema

In 1927 *The Jazz Singer* was released, starring famous singer Al Jolson in 'black face" as a stereotyped "negro" lead character. It featured a prerecorded soundtrack and a few "talkie" sequences—and it changed movies forever.

The 1930s saw the rise of major movie studios, MGM, Twentieth Century Fox, RKO, Warner Brothers, and others. Movie moguls (heads of studios) controlled the product, hiring actors, directors, and producers like factory workers to churn out hundreds of films a year. The early sound era was surprisingly filled with movies containing excessive sex and violence, which provoked the indignation of the public. In order to preempt government censorship, the studios developed their own production code in 1934 that restricted how sex, violence, and profanity could be addressed in movies.

Citizen Kane (1941), Orson Welles' first feature film is considered by many critics to be the best film of all time. It chronicles the life of fictional character Charles Foster Kane from obscurity to riches and reveals the loss of innocence and love in his quest for power. Welles' unique style of montage editing, dramatic lighting, deep focus cinematography, tragic realism, and complex characterizations combined to create a movie that would influence the future of all filmmaking to come.

Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine.

Casablanca starred Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman.

Noir Cinema

America entered into the War in 1941, and most of Hollywood followed the country's pro-war sentiments, producing films like *Casablanca* (1942), starring Humphrey Bogart. But after the war, the long tradition of anti-war movies returned with *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) an Oscar winning film arguing the negative effects on returning soldiers.

The late 1940s and early 1950s also replaced the previous optimism in the cinema, and the now-growing empire of television, with a new pessimistic genre called "film noir" (literally, *dark cinema*). These movies, possibly fueled by an enigmatic Cold War danger and the newly threatening atomic age of mass destruction, were detective stories that took place in mostly gritty urban environments. They questioned authority by portraying police and soldiers as corrupt, were cynical about love, by depicting women as seducers motivated by greed rather than love ("femme fatale"), and often dealt with deeply psychologically disturbed heroes.

The most well-known director of noir thrillers, Alfred Hitchcock, "the Master of Suspense," hit his stride in the mid-1950s with such thrillers as *Rear Window* (1954), *Psycho* (1960), and *Vertigo* (1958). By the 1950s color became a creative choice exercised by producers and directors in a growing number of films.

Widescreen Cinema & Television

In the 1950s black and white television was an increasingly popular medium with the public, who could now enjoy the entertainment of Hollywood in the comfort of their own homes. So the movies had to compete. In this period, movies began experimenting with more color,

Frank Capra's 1946 drama *It's a Wonderful Life* continues to delight audiences today as it is aired on television every Christmas season. James Stewart played the role of George Bailey, a suicidal businessman visited by an angel who helps him to see what life would have been like had he never been born.

stereophonic sound, big budget spectacles, 3-D, and widescreen cinema. The biblical epic *The Robe* was released in 1953 with widescreen Cinemascope. Widescreen created a "wider vision" of life, with its ability to capture panoramas of both rural and urban environments, its deeper focus, and visual space to work with character relationships. Some classical films that used the widescreen to great benefit were films like David Lean's World War I epic *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and Robert Wise's Swiss musical *The Sound of Music* (1965).

Rebel Cinema

Nineteen sixty-seven is the year attributed to the start of what some call the New Golden Age of Hollywood—and what critics would call a more permissive age. By 1968 the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) had replaced the Hollywood production code with what we now know as the MPAA rating system. This system created rating categories labeled for adults which would allow filmmakers to portray many forms of previously banned sex and violence, and along with them, more criminals and misfits as anti-heroes. Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) is generally considered the inaugural film of this new era. It transformed the gangster picture into a political satire of outlaw lovers Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, heartland heroes awash in sexual perversion who die in an ironic bloodbath the likes of which had never been filmed before. *Bonnie and Clyde* set the pace for the next decade of rebel filmmakers rejecting social norms of propriety, sexuality, and authority.

This era also saw the coming of age of "auteur" filmmaking, that a film is the product of one genius, the director, who is responsible for all the elements of a movie. Though directors in earlier years such as Howard Hawks and Frank Capra could fit this definition with their classic westerns and positive American values, it was this new generation that exploited the auteur concept into a household term—with a darker side. Among these new maverick "auteurs" and their creations were Mike Nichols' socially defiant *The Graduate* (1967), Dennis Hopper's hippie drug celebration *Easy Rider* (1969), John Schlesinger's X-rated Oscar winner, *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), and Robert Altman's anti-war satire, *M*A*S*H* (1970). Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) is perhaps the quintessential movie of this "rebel directors" period. In it, Coppola depicts the Italian immigrant world of the Mafia, with its devotion to family and equal devotion to the "business" of crime, as a metaphor critiquing the American social and economic experience as corrupt and built on violence.

Blockbuster Cinema

Though Hollywood studios had always made what we now call blockbusters, expensive spectacle films with wide commercial appeal, the 1970s opened the door to what would become a growing emphasis on this cinematic form by studio productions into the twenty-first century. A brief consideration of the top 25 grossing movies of all time explains why: Almost every one of them is a blockbuster movie. And many of these moneymaking hits are the franchise sequels with which we are so familiar today: *Star Wars, Raiders of the Lost Ark, Harry Potter, The Lord of the Rings, Batman,* and *Pirates of the Caribbean.*

It all started with Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) and George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977). *Jaws* would make more money in its opening few weeks than all the movies made by Universal that year. The temptation toward making more blockbusters is obvious. This "genre" of filmmaking would focus on more frivolous mass entertainment over "serious" filmmaking, younger viewers over older, wide releases, and immediate and repeat viewing. Critics would complain that their obsession with special effects and unrelenting action sequences of violence depreciate the most important values of storytelling: plot, character depth, and insight into the human condition. But to this day, these are the films that make American movies the dominating influence in global cinema.

Independent Cinema

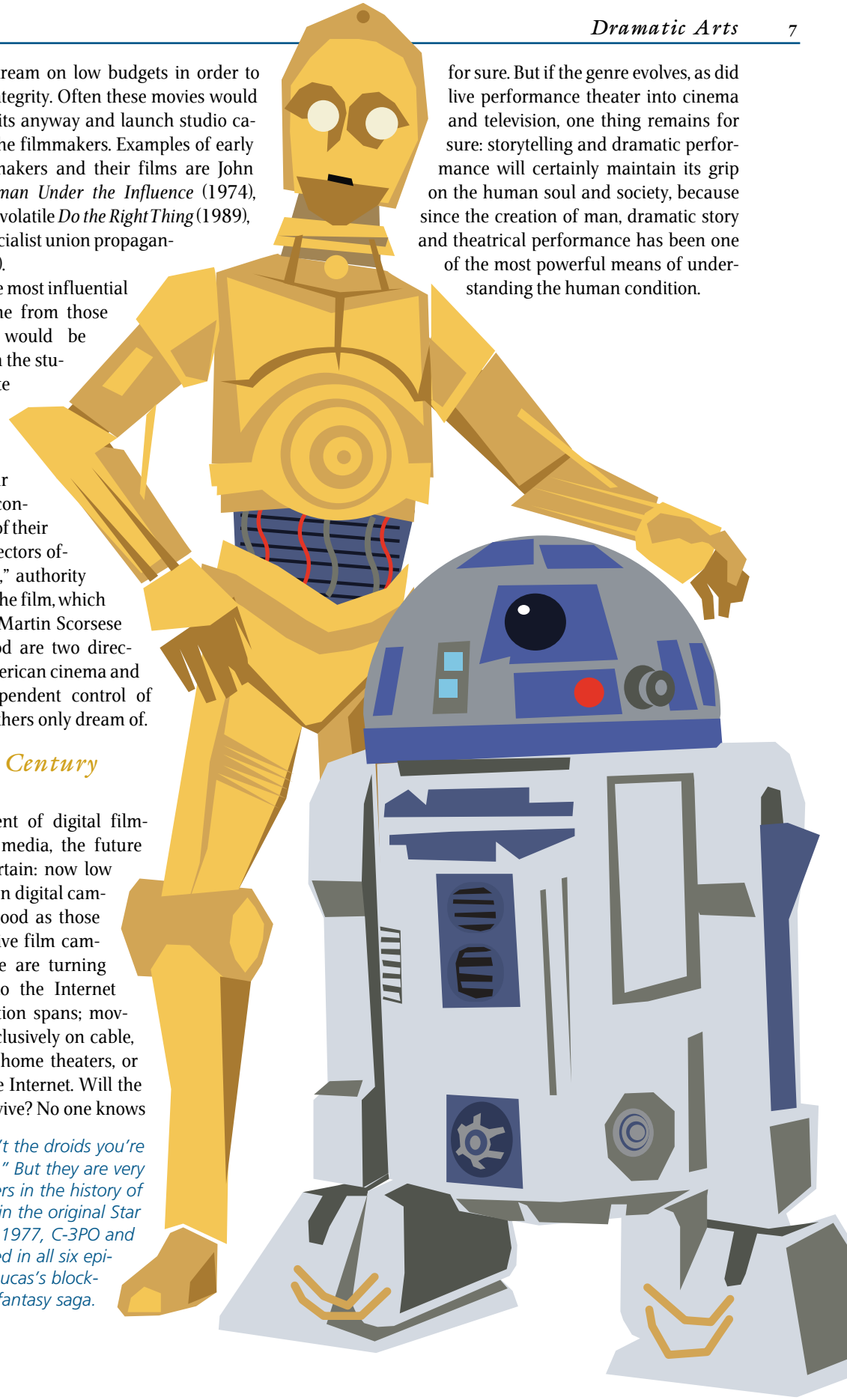
The growth of franchise films and big budget studio movies inspired a backlash of independent filmmaking in the 1970s and 80s. "Indies" would make their movies

outside the mainstream on low budgets in order to maintain artistic integrity. Often these movies would become surprise hits anyway and launch studio careers for some of the filmmakers. Examples of early independent filmmakers and their films are John Cassavetes' *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974), Spike Lee's racially volatile *Do the Right Thing* (1989), and John Sayles' socialist union propaganda *Matewan* (1989).

But perhaps the most influential independence came from those filmmakers who would be able to work within the studio system to create big budget mainstream as well as low budget movies and maintain their control over the content and signature of their pictures. These directors often have "final cut," authority over the editing of the film, which is a rare privilege. Martin Scorsese and Clint Eastwood are two directors who typify American cinema and maintain an independent control of their movies that others only dream of.

Twenty-first Century Cinema

With the advent of digital filmmaking and new media, the future of cinema is uncertain: now low budget films shot on digital cameras can look as good as those made with expensive film cameras; young people are turning more and more to the Internet with shorter attention spans; movies can be seen exclusively on cable, or in large-screen home theaters, or downloaded on the Internet. Will the movie theaters survive? No one knows for sure. But if the genre evolves, as did live performance theater into cinema and television, one thing remains for sure: storytelling and dramatic performance will certainly maintain its grip on the human soul and society, because since the creation of man, dramatic story and theatrical performance has been one of the most powerful means of understanding the human condition.



"These aren't the droids you're looking for." But they are very famous characters in the history of film. Introduced in the original Star Wars movie in 1977, C-3PO and R2-D2 appeared in all six episodes of George Lucas's blockbuster science fantasy saga.

Critical Issues

The critical issues surrounding dramatic theater have followed its history: its effect on society; its internal moral culture; and its comparison with rational, philosophical discourse. The Christian church has had a tumultuous relationship with theater and movies, but it was a pagan who set the stage for the dominant criticisms that would be repeated throughout history. At the very origins of classical theater in Athens (360 B.C.), Plato complained about the power of storytelling and theater to subvert society through the emotions. His prejudicial favor of rational philosophy as the superior means of social control led him to propose the banishment of poets and storytellers in *The Republic*. He believed that the very act of imitation (*mimesis*) that artists engaged in was inherently lying because of its artifice and fiction. Plato concluded that the dramatic performance or literary representation of the base nature of man would stimulate the imitation of such sins in society and personal life. The masses, as opposed to the elite rulers, are those most susceptible to manipulation and rhetoric.

These arguments would continue to be repeated throughout the history of theater. One of the early Christian fathers, Tertullian, wrote "The Shows" (*De Spectaculis*) in the second century A.D., wherein he condemned the theater and public games not only for the immorality of gladiatorial combat, but also for their origins in and dedications to pagan idols. He complained of immodest costume, foul language, the excitement of illicit emotions and intoxication in the audience, as well as the falsity of fiction, and forbade all Christian attendance at the theater and games. The fact that Christians were mocked in the theater, and eventually murdered in the games, did not help redeem the reputation theater had with Christians for centuries.

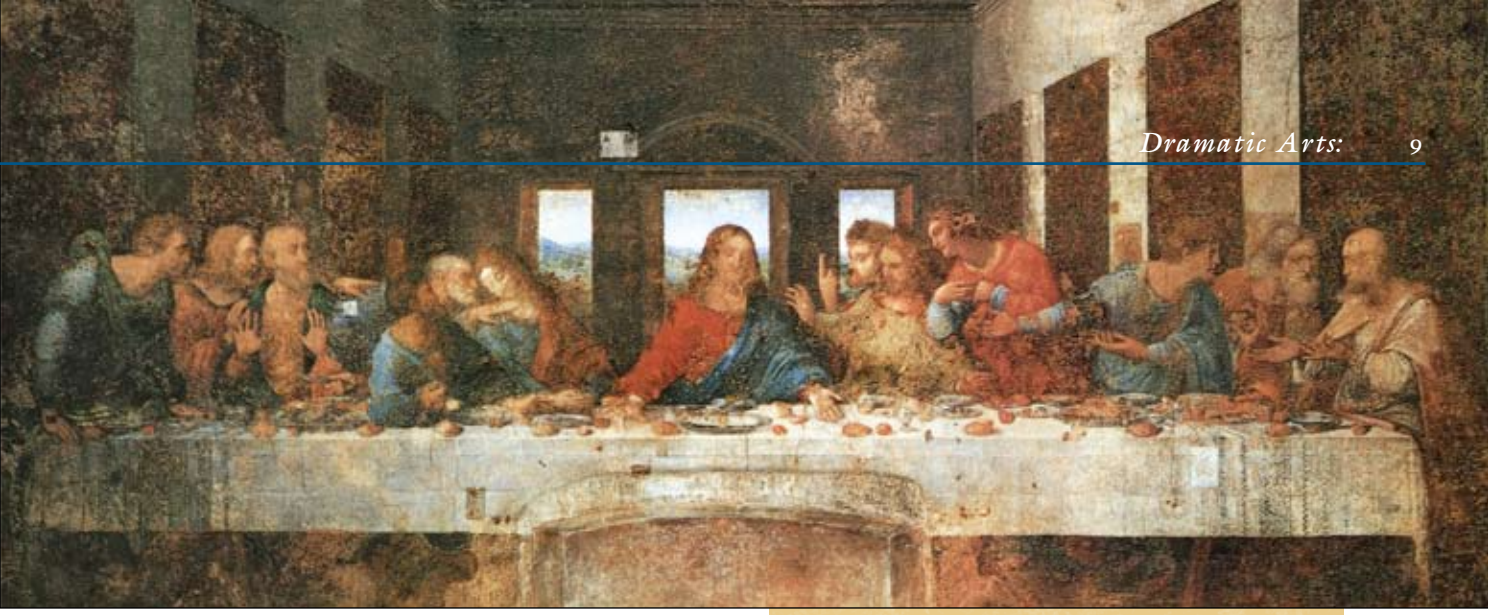
William Prynne denounced the origins of theater as pagan and idolatrous.

Theater has never been without its Christian defenders, but they usually pale in comparison to the influence that key leaders of the faith had against it. Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430), one of those towering antagonistic influences, was himself deeply influenced by Plato. His duality of God and Satan, body and spirit, reason and emotion built a foundation of prejudice against theater for not only the medieval period but for the Puritans as well. He considered the incarnational aspect of drama to be fleshly and emotional as opposed to the superiority of the life of the mind and calm reason. Acting was "imaginary" and therefore not true, but illusion and manipulation through lies. The portrayal of sins on the stage was inseparable from the real thing, and therefore immoral, and the entertainment nature of it was a frivolous waste of time.

In the era of Shakespeare's England of the early 1600s, the Puritans took up the fight against theater with a vengeance. The Puritan polemicist William Prynne wrote the longest, most ferocious attack of antitheatricalism, *Histriomastix*. He condemned the origins of theater as pagan and idolatrous, "odious, unseemly, pernicious, and unlawful" which no Christian dare patronize; he accused the actors of living lives of debauchery as effeminate long-haired cross-dressers and "notorious whores;" he condemned the actions on stage as morally repellent and inducing imitative behavior in the audience, such as "amorous, mixed, effeminate, lascivious, lust-exciting dancing." Ironically, Prynne's vociferous attacks were not founded on having actually seen any plays.

Today's era of Christian media watchdogs have carried on the tradition of concern over dramatic theater with online movie reviews that count the number of obscenities and detail all morally objectionable behavior depicted in the media. Gossip magazines and TV shows use paparazzi to exploit every shocking moment of celebrity actors' debauched lives, simultaneously worshipping them and holding them up for contempt. Psychological studies are made, linking onscreen dissolute behaviors and the disintegration of social norms. Things have not changed much over three thousand years.

While all these issues over theater continue to the present day with modern cinema and television, one of them is particularly significant: the influence of dramatic narrative on the masses. The power of rational argument and empirical observation, once deified in the Enlightenment, has been uncovered as culturally imperialistic and inadequate in understanding the human condition. We live in a postmodern culture that is saturated in narrative. With the advent of the Internet and



television, believer and unbeliever alike are ingesting continuous amounts of story through the dramatic performance of long running TV shows and sitcoms, music videos, viral videos, movies, videogames, and webisodes.

Through all of history, the tendency of the mainstream masses leans toward a "lowest common denominator," in both intelligence and morality. French intellect Alexis de Tocqueville, in his observations of American life in 1835, concluded: "It has always been the theater that the learned and the educated have had the greatest difficulty in making their tastes prevail over that of the people and preventing themselves from being carried away by them. The pit [where the plebian sits in the playhouse] often lays down the law for the boxes [the seating of the aristocracy]." Or as Andrew Fletcher wrote, "If a man were permitted to make all the ballads he need not care who should make the laws of a nation." The stories told in the dramatic arts of mass media have surely become the defining national ballads that Fletcher spoke of.

But appeal to the artistic elite in Off-Broadway, independent TV, films, and Internet sites can just as easily result in pushing the bounds of moral decency and social indoctrination. Witness the power of conspiracy theories in our post-modern culture, where as many as thirty percent of Americans believe that the Bush administration knew of the 9/11 attacks in advance and may have even orchestrated them—and this theorizing spearheaded by academic professors. Or consider the influence of fictional narratives based on pseudo-scholarly research like *The Da Vinci Code,* a case where millions place their faith in spurious esoteric fables that incite anti-Christian prejudice rather than accepting sound historical research. And how can this happen? Because the power of mass culture lies in the power of a story well told or well performed—a believable narrative. The power of narrative can be used to deceive or to tell the truth. So, the question remains: What is the proper relationship of the Christian to dramatic narrative and performance?

THE DA VINCI CODE

In Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* it is asserted that to the left of Jesus (from a viewer's point-of-view) is Mary Magdalene, not, as most art historians identify that person, John the Apostle, and that the body angles between Jesus and John form the letter M—a reference to the Magdalene.

Christian artist Makoto Fujimura writes about this artwork: *Yes, there is an "M" imbedded in the painting, but Dan Brown does not go far enough in tracing its mystery.*

The real "M" or a series of "M"s, starting from Philip's stretched out hand, do not end with John, but with Judas. More specifically, the shock wave ends in Judas's right hand, which holds the money-bag, symbolically depicting the very coins that Judas would receive to betray Jesus.

Is the figure of John effeminate? Yes. But every male figure that Leonardo painted bordered on androgyny. Leonardo's depiction of the sexual genre has never been a secret, and even a critique of such in open forums would not have surprised Leonardo. What would be shocking to Leonardo would be if the viewer did not somehow recognize the greatest message imbedded in the painting—that Judas, the seed of betrayal, is in all of us.

A Christian Response

The antitheatrical prejudice that has typified Christian history contains both helpful and unhelpful elements. The mixing of pagan idolatry and immoral excess that followed non-Christian cultural dominance in theater and media is certainly worthy of condemnation. But too often the Church and her shepherds have tended to react with their own excess in denouncing dramatic performance as *inherently* sinful or worldly. Examples of corruption can always be found, but that is not really the point. A brief examination of the dramatic arts in the Bible clarifies for the believer the high value that God places on theater and drama.

It should be no surprise to Christians that the religious cult, or system of practices and rituals, of Old Testament Israel included elements of sacred performance in its Ancient Near Eastern religious context. Though the Jewish religion was antithetical to its pagan neighbors in its demystification of nature and rejection of magic, it still retained aspects of its common cultural environment. The rich imagery of things in heaven and earth that filled Moses' Tabernacle (Ex. 25–28) and Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 6; 2 Chron. 3–4) did not violate the second commandment, but rather operated as a symbolic stage upon which God directed his Levitical priesthood to enact the atoning drama "on earth as it is in heaven." The various ritual sacrifices served as scripted performance *and* participation in the holy. The Jewish feasts and festivals included symbolic dramatic reenactment of sacred history, giving them present reality: the Passover commemorating the Egyptian Exodus and the Feast of Tabernacles memorializing the Tabernacle in the wilderness. The Psalms were used for praise and worship unto Yahweh in the courts of His Temple. Singers and musicians were an explicit part of the Levitical priesthood given exclusively to temple service (1 Chron. 9:33) whose performance was crucial to God's glory (2 Chron. 5:11–14). Dancing was an established means of worshipping God (Ps. 150:4) as well as celebration (Ex. 15:20).

God often used explicit dramatic performance rather than mere verbal sermons to communicate his will. Ezekiel could be considered a thespian prophet. God told him to perform a play of war as a prophecy, acted out with a miniature city besieged by battering rams (Ezek. 4:1–3). Then God had Ezekiel engage in a "performance art" prophecy by lying on his sides for 430 days, tied up in ropes, eating food cooked over burning excrement, with an emblem of the sins of Israel on top of him (4:4–8). Finally, he concluded this performance by cutting his hair and beard and dispersing it in various ways to dramatically depict God's concluding judgment (5:1–4). God then told Ezekiel to perform a theatrical prophecy of exile by covering his face, dragging his baggage around day and night, and digging a hole in a wall to store it, while repeating the scripted words, "I am a sign to you" (12:1–11). Ezekiel then had to tremble and shudder in fear while eating his meals as another dramatic sign of the anxiety that Israel would feel in their exile (12:17–20). And later, God had him perform a sign of two sticks, symbolizing Judah and Israel, becoming one, not unlike a magician before his audience (37:15–23). Ezekiel was quite the performance artist.

Jeremiah is called "the weeping prophet." But he should have been called "the acting prophet," because so many of his prophecies were theatrical performances. God had Jeremiah act out His "Word" symbolically by hiding his girdle by the Euphrates (Jer. 13:1–11), breaking a potter's bottle in the valley of Hinnom (19:1), walking through all the gates of Jerusalem (17:19–27), wearing a yoke on his neck (27:1–14), purchasing the deed to a field (32:6–15), burying stones in some pavement (43:8–13), and casting a scroll into the Euphrates (51:59–64). Isaiah was commanded by God to engage in shocking performance art as well. He was to walk around naked as a visual "sign and token" of the shame Israel was about to experience at the hands of Egypt (Isa. 20:2–4). Another prophet plays out a prophecy by physically wounding himself to embody God's word to Ahab (1 Kings 20:35–43). God values dramatic performance as a significant means of communicating his Word to man.

In the New Testament, God uses the special visual effects of a picnic blanket filled with unclean animals to persuade Peter of the New Covenant inclusion of Gentiles (Acts 10). Agabus binds his hands as a prophetic enactment of Paul's future in Rome (Acts 21:11). The sacraments of baptism and Lord's Supper dramatically act out spiritual cleansing and communion with God, and Gospel writers use the theatrical spectacle of an emperor's triumphal entry as an ironic drama of Jesus' humble performance having epic spiritual significance (Matt. 21:1–10; Col 2:14–15). Jesus Christ's revelation to St. John clocks in as the most extensive theatrical exhibition ever recorded by prophet or pious poet, surpassing the big budget blockbuster visions of Ezekiel's resurrection valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37), and Daniel's equally spectacular sci-fi pageant of hybrid creature features (Daniel 7)—and stage-directed as it were, by the ultimate playwright, God.

Several books of the Bible itself are deliberately structured according to theatrical conventions. The books of Job and Jonah are depicted in dialogues reminiscent of ancient plays, including prologues, epilogues, and several acts. Job's friends function as the chorus of ancient theatrical performances. God's theological discourse with Job is not so much a rational lecture of doctrine as

When the Japanese wrested control of Burma (modern-day Myanmar) from the British in 1942, they needed a land route to supply their armies. Using the forced labor of their prisoners of war, they constructed the 258-mile long Burma Railway from Bangkok to Rangoon. *To End All Wars,* a 2001 film starring Kiefer Sutherland, Robert Carlyle, and Sakae Kimura, gives an account of the power of Christian faith among a group of prisoners in one of these labor camps.

it is a dramatic spectacle of sarcastic rebuke—a satire—using a big budget tornado as God's Dolby sound system. Some scholars have argued that the book of Mark resembles a Greek tragedy that follows Aristotelian structure, involving a prologue (Mk. 1:1–15), complications (1:16–8:26), a recognition scene (8:27–30), and a reversal of the fortunes of the leading character followed by the denouement (8:31–16:8).

This does *not* lend question to Scripture's divine authorship simply because it follows human literary convention. But it does illustrate that God considers theatrical expression to be an important means of disclosing truth, as well as disclosing Himself. In fact, the use of narrative and drama to communicate God's Word to man is so prevalent in Scripture that some theologians suggest we approach our theology in dramatic terms of God's speech and actions rather than in metaphysical terms of facts, ideas, and propositions. Kevin Vanhoozer suggests we see the Bible not as "a handbook of revealed information, the systematization of which leads to a set of doctrinal truths," but as a dramatic script written by God for the stage of the world, with humans as the actors, God as the author, the Holy Spirit as director, and the Church as playing out the final act. "To become a Christian is to be taken up into the drama of God's plan for creation." Theology is not merely an intellectual exercise of mentally constructing an accurate picture of reality in our ideas; it is a theatrical performance where Christians participate in God's story of redemption in time and space history.

For Christians who hold to the Bible as their ultimate authority, the biblical use of theater, spectacle, fictional parable, and dramatic performance answers the question of whether the use of theater is "false" or untruthful. If God himself uses fictional drama and forms of

role-playing so frequently to incarnate truth, then the use of such dramatic artifice is not intrinsically untruthful. The intention to deceive or tell the truth is what determines the morality of the drama, not the medium of performance itself. When an acting troupe puts on a play or a producer releases a movie, they are no more engaging in deception than when Ezekiel performed a prophecy or Jesus told a fictional parable. Nor can the bodily nature of drama be considered inherently fleshly or worldly. Believers are commanded to abstain from engaging in explicit idolatrous ritual and ceremony (Deut. 18:9–13) but have been commanded by God to engage in performances described above that glorify Him or communicate truth. Bodily performance is as integral to communication, sacrament, and worship as mental assent or doctrinal belief.

Sex, Violence and Profanity

Another important issue that requires attention for a Christian approach to dramatic performance is the depiction of sinful behavior in theater. As Plato, Augustine, and the Puritans were concerned, does the depiction of sex, violence, and profanity in dramatic performance incite imitation in the audience? Here again, the Bible is instructive in its use of sex, violence, and profanity within its narrative. As a record of God bringing blessing and redemption to a sinful world, the literary text contains the worldview narrative of "Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration." As such, it does not fail to detail the sinful behavior of mankind within the context of the story of redemption.

A believable and influential portrayal of redemption necessitates a believable portrayal of the sin from which one is to be redeemed. And the Bible contains some fairly explicit portraits of depravity. An exhaustive list would be chapter-length, so a sampling of such immoral behavior will have to suffice: Adultery (Prov. 7), incest (Gen. 19:31–36), masochism and

satanic worship (1 Kings 18:25–28), sexual orgies (Ex. 32:3–6), prostitution (Gen. 38:12–26), rape (2 Sam. 13:6–14), cannibalism (2 Kings 6:28), decapitation (1 Sam. 31:9), disemboweling (2 Sam. 20:10), dismemberment (1 Sam. 15:32-33), genocide (Joshua), human sacrifice (2 Kings 3:27), dozens of murders (Genesis to Revelation), suicide (Gen. 16:29–10), blasphemy (Isa. 36:14–20), revenge (Gen. 34:25), theft (Gen. 31:19), voyeurism (2 Sam. 11:2) and vulgar insults (1 Kings 12:10).

While much of the sex, violence, and profanity in the Bible are dealt with discreetly, there are nevertheless many passages that contain some rather explicit descriptions used by scriptural writers to make a holy point. The book of Judges, if it were made into a movie, would be rated NC-17 for its grotesque sex and violence used to make the polemical argument of social degeneration when "everyone does what is right in his own eyes" (Judg. 17:6). The evil and violence of the *genetically mutated* beasts in Revelation could justifiably categorize that book as a horror genre whose special effects outdoes George Lucas's Industrial Light and Magic and whose gory depictions would put to shame the grand guignol theater of blood. The Song of Solomon has been revealed by the conservative scholars of the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* to be far more explicitly erotic in its original Hebrew language than translators have been willing to translate. God seems to use the dramatic imagery of adultery and harlotry as dominant metaphors to depict Israel's spiritual unfaithfulness (Ex. 34:15–16; Lev. 17:7; Deut. 31:16; Isa. 54; Jere. 3:2–8; Hosea). The shocking sexual drama narrated by God in Ezekiel 16 and 23 alone are so graphic as to trouble many Bible readers. The Scriptures also record blasphemies and profanity from the tongues of men and angels as well (Gen. 3:4–6; Isa. 36:14–20; Matt. 26:74). Even the Apostle Paul, intending to indicate the spiritual poverty of man's goodness compared to God's holiness, uses a profane Greek word for excrement (Phil. 3:8).

And the depiction of such evil is not limited to historical recording. The fictional parables of Jesus contain violent images of beatings, murder, arson (Matt. 22:1–13), choking and torture (Matt. 18:23–25), drunken parties and dismemberment (Matt. 24:45–51), Godfather-style drowning (Matt. 18:6), more dismemberment (Matt. 18:7–9), and the destruction of private property (Matt. 7:24–26)—and all these as metaphors to describe the impact of the Kingdom of God.

There are several aspects to these depictions of sex, violence, and profanity in the Bible that make them moral *exhortation* rather than immoral *exploitation.* Christians must take these qualifications into consideration in developing their standards of just what is appropriate in theatrical depiction of evil. First, the *intent* behind biblical spectacle is to expose man's inhumanity to man and rebellion against God, not to imbibe in evil as entertainment. Secondly, the *depiction* of evil is not indulgent. Explicit portrayal is usually rare and surrounded by more implicit allusion. Thirdly, in the Bible, sinful behavior has *consequences.* Whether in this world or the next, evil leads to self-destruction, not unfettered freedom. And lastly, the *context* of evil is always presented as immoral, not as a legitimate "alternative lifestyle." Christians must be cautious in their involvement with or observance of such dramatic performance of evil to determine whether the context of such display is redemptive or gratuitous. And it is important to realize that the effect of a work of art does not always match the intent.

Narrative and Dramatic Performance

As Christians who live in a postmodern world that has produced suspicion toward abstract reason and has embraced the body, narrative, and imagination, we must navigate the treacherous pathway between the extremes of Platonic idealism and Aristotelian empiricism. Platonic idealism exalts the abstract world of rationality as the ultimate truth. It tends to reject theater as a "fleshly" enterprise manipulating emotions, which is inferior to the contemplative life of philosophy and intellectual pursuit that stimulate reason. It is spirit without body. Aristotelian empiricism rejects the "spiritual" and abstract side of reality in favor of the concrete body of "this world" experience. But both views suffer from the same unbiblical dualism of separating spirit and body, emotion and intellect, reason and imagination, and valuing one over the other.

A proper biblical approach to understanding the place of narrative and dramatic performance is incarnational. It places equal ultimacy in both spirit and body as a unified whole, emotion and intellect as equally a part of God's image in man, and reason and imagination as equally necessary to God's revelation. Jesus Christ, as the very *image* of the invisible God (Col. 1:15) is an *incarnation* of God's presence, the manifestation of deity in *bodily form* (Col. 2:9), God's own dramatic performance of His Word and will within time and space. Jesus acts out God's scripted will of a redemptive story in a dramatic theology of the body—Word become flesh (John 1:14). In this way, dramatic performance is incarnational. It embodies a worldview in its theme, brings concrete bodily expression to abstract ideas. It is living doctrine. The power of theater is the power of incarnation through narrative.

The narrative nature of drama is also foundational to

a biblical worldview. About thirty percent of the Bible is rational propositional truth and laws—whereas seventy percent of the Bible is story, vision, symbol, and narrative. The Bible is the story of God's redemptive activity in history. The Bible is not a systematic theological textbook. It communicates doctrine and theology mostly through story. Storytelling draws us into truth by incarnating worldview through narrative. Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration—the elements of a worldview—is a narrative progression of events that can be seen in dramatic performance.

Stories are means of understanding truth through existential inhabitation of narrative. As we enter into the story and see ourselves in it, we see truth in a way that mere logical or doctrinal discourse cannot achieve. As Abraham Kuyper explained in reference to biblical literary narrative, "revelation strikes all the chords of the soul, and not just one, e.g., the rational one. This makes it clear that the historical doctrine of revelation is not the barren propositional one it is often charged with being."[2]

Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God mostly through parables. And those parables communicated invisible reality in terms of visible, sensate, dramatic stories. To Him, the Kingdom was far too deep and rich a truth to entrust merely to rational abstract propositions. He chose stories of weddings, investment bankers, unscrupulous slaves, and buried treasure over syllogisms, abstraction, systematics, or dissertations. And His usage of such metaphors and images was not a "primitive" form of discourse, as if ancient Jews were not sophisticated enough to understand abstraction. In fact, at the time of the writing of the New Testament, Israel was immersed in the Hellenistic culture that dominated the Middle East with its heavily abstracted thinking. Jesus deliberately chose story over abstraction.

Kenneth E. Bailey, an expert on Middle Eastern New Testament studies, explains that "a biblical story is not simply a 'delivery system' for an idea. Rather, the story first creates a world and then invites the listener to live in that world, to take it on as part of who he or she is. . . . In reading and studying the Bible, ancient tales are not examined merely in order to extract a theological principle or ethical model." Theologian Kevin Vanhoozer agrees that doctrinal propositions are not "more basic" than the narrative, and in fact, fail to communicate what narrative can. He writes in his book, *The Drama of Doctrine*, "Narratives make story-shaped points that cannot always be paraphrased in propositional statements without losing something in translation." If you try to scientifically dissect the parable you will kill it, and if you discard the carcass once you have your doctrine, you have discarded the heart of God.

In conclusion, our modern western bias toward rational theological propositions can too easily blind us to the biblical emphasis on visually dramatic stories. We downplay dramatic performance as dangerous or irrational, while God embraces such incarnation as a vital means of communicating his message. We elevate rational discourse as superior and theater as inferior in its emotional and entertainment orientation, while God elevates dramatic narrative equally with rational discourse as part of our *imago dei*. We consider stories to be quaint illustrations of abstract doctrinal universal truths, while God uses stories as his dominant means of incarnating truth. While it would be equally dangerous to swing the pendulum to the other extreme of postmodern irrationality in our pursuit of a Christian worldview, we are obligated to consider our own cultural biases and maintain a proper biblical balance of reason and imagination, of orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right behavior), of theology and theater.

—Brian Godawa

Further Reading

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Endnotes

1 More information about morality plays may be found at Links 1 and 2 for this chapter at www.VeritasPress.com/OmniLinks.

2 As quoted in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Semantics of Biblical Literature," in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon,* ed. D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1986), p. 78.